

Coping with Marginalized Students Inclusion in EL Teacher Training

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Abstract

Marginalized groups present part of our reality which we would prefer to forget about. Yet, the humankind remains (un)aware of the simple fact that there is merely a very tiny red line between the central and marginalized parts: any of us can at one point in life simply, unwillingly and abruptly wake up on the other side of this line!!!

Prospective English language teachers should receive a sound training in recognizing the marginalized groups in order to be able to assess their needs with the necessary sensitive professionalism and thus build a sound inclusive teaching setting in which all participants will enjoy education based on the principles of equity and equality.

This paper deals with the principles and possible practices employed by teacher trainers in training prospective English language teachers to cope with the serious task of developing justified and fair attitudes towards the less fortunate students in the attempt to include them into the teaching process in the most beneficial manner for all the parties concerned.

Keywords: inclusion, marginalized groups, equity, inclusive education

1. Introduction

The starting question in dealing with marginalization is exactly where is the line that limits the socially accepted norms and standards and thus places certain groups of people on the other side?

Marginalization basically arises from culturally deeply embedded values, beliefs, standards, norms and other factors which determine acceptability within a certain social frame. Hence, groups which at a certain time might have been perfectly accommodated in one social setting could easily find themselves on the other side of the line when, for any reason, they become part of different social circumstances. A good example of this can be found in wars and other types of ethnic or political disputes during which there is a substantial displacement of certain groups of population. This might often be the reason for their unsuccessful acculturation in the unfamiliar society which commonly results in their marginalization.

Undoubtedly, marginalization can occur even within the scope of one society without any external causes. Sometimes certain groups display certain types of behavior, beliefs, values etc. that are unacceptable to the broader community at that particular period of time. Even though these groups face marginalization, societal evolution and progress often influence the change of socially acceptable norms and standards which slowly, imperceptibly but effectively bring about change and place these groups once again within the socially acceptable limits. Here we can point to the gay groups who are becoming widely understood, accepted and included into their societies with their needs being treated on an equal basis with those who belong to the heterosexual communities.

But, in many cases marginalization is not so easily resolved because its causes can't be efficiently removed or cultural attitudes adjusted without broader campaigns for raising people's awareness of the real situation in which these particular marginalized groups are placed often without the slightest responsibility on their part. These situations primarily refer to the poor, to the people with serious diseases and disorders, to those of different races than the predominant one in a given society, to those of different religions etc.

2 Causes of marginalization

Social exclusion of a certain minority or sub-group pushed to the edge and accompanied by negligence of their needs and lessening of their importance is defined as marginalization. It may be caused by various reasons such as: social class, educational status, living standards, personal choices in fashion, as well as disability, drug addiction, belonging to LGBT community etc. Regardless of the reasons causing social exclusion, the outcome is always that these groups and individuals find themselves prevented from full participation in all spheres of social life.

3. Levels of marginalization

As marginalization of individuals or groups may have various causes, so too, it may occur on various levels. Thus, individual exclusion refers to: single mothers, disabled from labor force, LGBT and other intersexual people. Exclusion may also take the form of community exclusion on economic, racial or other basis. Even difference in views (dissenting, radical, controversial) on certain topics (evolution, AIDS, climate change and alike) may put intellectuals and thinkers on the other side of the widely accepted norms and result in exclusion.

Other societal levels on which exclusion may occur for numerous reasons are unemployment, transportation, religion etc.

Consequences of this phenomenon may have severe effects both on the excluded individuals/groups and bring about criminal behavior or result in certain undesired health issues on the side of the concerned.

4. Raising prospective EL teachers' awareness of marginalization

During the training period, prospective EL teachers undergo practical training in schools where they get acquainted with the structural and hierarchical placement of the educational system, the number and kind of pedagogical professionals (besides the teachers) who participate in the process of education, as well as their working tasks and responsibilities, the physical appearance and organization of the school, the number of students, classes and the number of students per class, the national structure of classes, students' background and alike. All these factors are pertinent to the proper understanding of prospective teachers of all the aspects and circumstances they might find themselves dealing with during their practical work.

As a teacher trainer I have come to realize that prospective EL teachers often don't engage into a deeper analysis of these factors or, even if they have been made aware of them, they commonly neglect them during the preparation and realization of the practical classes they are to have during their practice. Finally, when they take an exam in practical work, it is more than obvious that they neglect most of these factors because of either being overly concentrated on their own performance during the practical exam or because they simply lack the necessary preparation to be able to deal with this aspect. Either way, my personal experience speaks in favor of the need to raise students' awareness of this phenomenon and equip them with the relevant knowledge concerning this aspect of education.

Educational exclusion can be painful and damaging to children's psychological health particularly, but not only, during the early stages of education and can result in child's withdrawing from certain crucial aspects of participation in the school life, leaving certain individuals out of the relevant educational processes thus producing alienated individuals who perceive the schooling community as hostile, difficult to integrate in and hence, uninteresting. This, in turn, can easily produce indifferent students who take the line of least resistance and either completely withdraw in their own world or begin to demonstrate unusual, hostile or even violent behavior. As the aims of educational system are basically those of equal participation and integration of all students, failure to prevent exclusion might cause the occurrence of effects contrary to the expectations of the educational system.

5. Approaching the phenomenon of marginalization in teaching languages

Foreign language teaching is a subject that is specific in many ways, but perhaps its cultural dimension is the one that can be most useful in raising students' awareness of the existence of differences and the necessity to recognize, assess and accept them in a relative way thus creating a positive base for appreciation of both the native and the target culture values. Acquiring of this asset will probably later lead to developing the ability of the younger generations to adjust to the existence of differences on all levels of their present and future societal life. Developing the right attitude towards differences in young children might result in preventing socially unacceptable behavior in certain individuals, their desire to condemn, exclude or in other way discriminate their peers who, for any kind of reasons don't fit into what at some point is considered a norm. Since, as it is well known and noticed through experience, norms, standards and criteria are subject to change, it is not unfeasible that proper understanding and acceptance of differences can contribute towards shifting of boundaries and inclusion of those who might have found themselves outside the accepted frames (in regard to the background, religion, race, economic circumstances, fashion, style of living, personal beliefs, opinions, values etc.)

Foreign language teaching can not only provide sound techniques and activities to enrich students' knowledge of the target culture thus opening to them a completely new and unknown world, but it can also contribute towards building intercultural awareness and understanding, as well as accepting multiculturalism and its principles upon which the present day globalizing society hopes to be safely based.

Foreign language teachers can also organize their classes in such a manner as to encourage cooperation among all students by using pair and group work, role playing and similar activities in which all students are treated on the basis of equity and there is no favoring of any of the participants.

6. Inclusion of marginalized groups in EL teaching

Which aspects should prospective EL teachers be made aware of? First of all, they should be well acquainted with all possible forms of exclusion and their manifestations, as sometimes they might be so subtle and hidden that a deeper analysis might be required to recognize and timely detect them. Exclusion is a sensitive matter which therefore requires profound analysis of all the aspects involved in its occurrence.

Secondly, prospective EL teachers must engage in a deeper analysis of the students' background, their national, religious, racial and cultural affiliation, their economic circumstances, as well as their character traits and health condition. This should be done in the initial stages, using all the available resources and, more importantly, in coordination with other relevant school factors (the pedagogue, psychologist, colleagues etc.).

The next phase will be to undertake all the necessary steps leading towards successful coping with any and every

aspect of the above stated factors and adjusting the syllabus, activities and classroom atmosphere towards the reduction of exclusion in the best possible manner. Needless to say, this will require a multisided approach and a lot of effort on the side of the teacher as a classroom mediator and negotiator and will often be directed towards the parents as well, as they may have crucial influence upon the performance of their children in many circumstances involving marginalization.

Finally, let us mention the role of the broader community and the need for promoting wide campaigns to raise the awareness of the entire society. This is undoubtedly pertinent to the way the society will deal with and solve undesired situations arising from marginalization.

7. Observations

As a teacher trainer at the Faculty of pedagogy in Bitola, I have been involved in conducting prospective EL teachers' practical classes in their last semester since 2009. Depending on the number of students in the last year of study, there are usually between 7 to 10 groups of 4 to 6 students participating in the practical work in various primary schools in Bitola. Each group is assigned to observe three classes and afterwards each student has to independently teach three classes, before taking the practical exam. These numbers indicate clearly that I have visited a significant number of classes and observed and assessed quite a number of students.

These school visits have drawn my attention to many phenomena taking place right in front of the eyes of almost all factors involved in the educational process which were not being either noticed or taken care of: favoring of individuals or groups, absence of students' conflict mediation from the side of the employees, bulling or mocking, disrespect towards students with special needs or disabilities etc. These were fortunately only separate, rare cases, but yet, prospective EL teachers were drawn attention to them and asked to include solutions to those situations in their lesson plans.

Despite the fact that coping with these phenomena was also assessed during the final practical exam, the impression remains that most of the EL students tried to avoid dealing with these situations and preferred moving along the line of least resistance. Only in a few isolated cases did EL students attempt to include activities that would deprive not even one single student of the opportunity to participate in the class activities, even if this meant preparing of separate activities specially designed for these students.

Yet the overall impression remains that marginalization awareness is not fully developed even in prospective EL teachers, let alone in students themselves. Coping with this extremely subtle and sensitive phenomenon will require some serious work on the side of all relevant societal factors before we live to see some truly effective results.

8. Research

This research was based on the findings of primary school EL classes observed during a six-year period (2009-2015) for the purpose of assessing practical work of future EL teachers and their final practical exam.

The basic method in this research was the method of observation. Classes were not recorded as this would've required obtaining a special permission from the school authorities.

Assessments sheets used to asses prospective EL teachers' achievements included the following assessment issues which are considered relevant to the objective assessment of certain aspects concerning marginalization: control of class, management skills, ability to deal with discipline, ability to involve all, moving around the class and using gestures as appropriate, student involvement/participation/motivation, giving feedback. As can easily be noticed, all these aspect may directly or indirectly affect the classroom atmosphere, the students' interrelations, their cooperation, participation, motivation and achievements.

Besides observing prospective EL teachers' treatment of these aspects during their practical work, a questionnaire was distributed among students on a voluntary basis and feedback was received from thirty students.

The questionnaire included four simple Yes/No questions, and only one question that required further elaboration. Posing only a limited number of simple questions aimed at only initially detecting the possible existence of marginalization and the (however superficial) present detection and recognition of the problem from the side of the students. It goes without saying that further multidisciplinary research will be required to obtain more precise and specific scientific results and find the most appropriate, scientifically based solutions.

9. Results

The results from the questionnaire clearly imply that none of the students engaged in any kind of analysis of the relevant factors concerning the students in the classes they taught prior to their practical work. Yet, students were quite optimistic as far as their own performance was concerned and as many as 15 students (50%) believed they managed to include all the students. Those who doubted that they had managed to achieve this goal believed that factors such as the type of material they taught, or the low level of general discipline in the class were the reasons why they failed to include them all.

Twenty students (66.6%) found that classroom collaboration was on a satisfactory level. All of the thirty students saw no sign of marginalization (even in cases in which it clearly existed.)

10. Conclusion

This paper aims at initiating research concerning the existence of marginalization within the educational system and, more importantly, finding solutions to such threatening phenomena that might have far -fetched undesired or even dangerous consequences.

It also tried to emphasize the importance of foreign language teaching in coping with such phenomena. In that sense, the proper training of prospective EL teachers presents a crucial contributing factor in decreasing risks of marginalization.

Since many questions concerning this phenomenon are open it is our deepest belief that relevant societal factors will engage in conflict to diminish the existence and consequences of this unwanted issue of the modern society.

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APPENDIX 1

Questionnaire:

1. Did you perform a deeper initial examination of national, racial, religious, economic, health (or other relevant) aspects concerning the students’ background in the classes in which you taught?

Yes

No

2. Do you think that you managed to include ALL the students during your classes?

Yes

No

If your answer is No, please state some of the reasons:

3. Was the collaboration among students satisfactory?

Yes

No

4. Were you able to detect any kind of marginalization of individuals or groups during the teaching process?

Yes

No

5. If your answer to the previous question is Yes, did you find it easy to cope with the situation?

Yes

No

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